



# MAGNIFICENT OBSESSION

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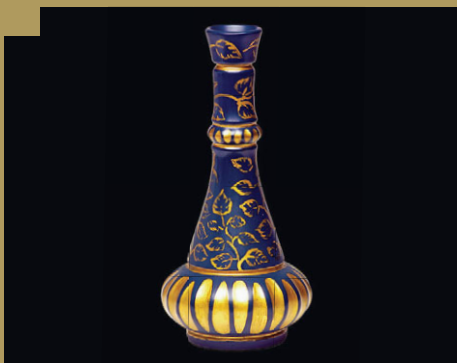
BY  
**KEN  
WYSOCKY**

A former Hollywood writer whose penchant for everything from Spock's ears to Carnac's turban makes him the king of **TV-MEMORABILIA COLLECTORS** — and the keeper of television's cultural flame.

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merican humorist James Thurber once astutely noted that one martini is OK,

two is too many, and three aren't enough. Substitute TV-show props for martinis, and the same principle applies in spades to James Comisar, a man who's spent the last 25 years doggedly turning Los Angeles upside down in a quiet quest to immortalize television's sprawling legacy.

Sure, Comisar could've chosen something easier as his calling, like herding thousands of cats every day across Mulholland Drive during rush hour. But the man is relentless — think Dr. Richard Kimble tracking the One-Armed Man on *The Fugitive*, or *Homeland*'s Carrie Mathison in pit-bull-on-bad-guy's-ankle mode. And as a result, he's now the owner, curator and self-described doting parent of what's arguably America's largest collection of TV memorabilia — the “Fabergé eggs of popular American culture,” as he puts it. No doubt about it: Comisar stands in boldly-gone-where-no-man-has-gone-before territory.

You name the show, and it's likely that Comisar owns something memorable from it: Ralph Kramden's bus-driver jacket from *The Honeymooners*? Yup. Maxwell Smart's shoe phone from *Get Smart*? Check. Bobby Ewing's cowboy hat from *Dallas*? Got it. Then there's the Conner and Huxtable families' living-room sofas from *Roseanne* and *The Cosby Show*, respectively; Cosmo Kramer's goofy lobster shirt from *Seinfeld* and the emergency-room set from *ER*. The list, just like *The Simpsons*, goes on. And on. And on.

While Comisar, 48, declines to specify the exact size of his ever-growing ensemble, this much is as certain as a verdict on *Law & Order*: The thousands upon thousands of items fill two climate- and light-controlled warehouses in an undisclosed Southern California location. (Inside, the facilities are pitch black 23 hours a day because too much light wreaks havoc on fragile cloth and other materials.) Comisar is equally mum about the collection's financial value. But you don't have to be a genius to figure out it's got to be a decent chunk of change. After all, an authentic pair of Batman and Robin costumes in good condition now goes for nearly \$1 million. Holy greenbacks, Batman!

“A weapon that Captain Kirk carried in just one episode of *Star Trek* sold for \$225,000,” says Comisar. “Even non-A-list pieces now sell for hundreds of thousands of dollars.”

But money is totally beside the point when it comes to Comisar's beloved TV mementos. The last thing on his mind as he slid down the memorabilia rabbit hole was whether they'd trend upward as an investment. “I just wanted to save the genie bottle from *I Dream of Jeannie*,” he says.

**PREVIOUS SPREAD:**  
**TOP ROW, FROM**

**LEFT:** the Bat Phone; Deputy Barney Fife's hat (*The Andy Griffith Show*); Annette's Mickey Mouse Club boots; Dr. Doug Ross' *ER* ID and supplies; Gilligan's hat; Tattoo's *Fantasy Island* jeep

**SECOND ROW:** a miniature KITT Car (*Knight Rider*); S.S. Minnow life preserver (*Gilligan's Island*); a Mrs. Butterworth's bottle; Captain Kirk's tunic (*Star Trek*)

**THIRD ROW:** California Raisins figurines; Wonder Woman's outfit; Snuggle fabric softener and stuffed bear; the Bunkers' chairs (*All in the Family*)

**FOURTH ROW:** Arnold's menu board (*Happy Days*); Carnac's turban; Kitchen Treat Turkey Dinner; Timmy Martin's shirt (*Lassie*); Jeannie's bottle; Maxwell Smart's ice-cream phone (*Get Smart*)

**BOTTOM ROW:** *Survivor*: Africa flag; Goober Pyle's felt crown (*The Andy Griffith Show*); a *Fear Factor* vomit bucket; *The Flying Nun*'s coronet; Dr. Marcus Welby, M.D.'s supplies; Speedy Alka Seltzer figurine

**OPPOSITE:**

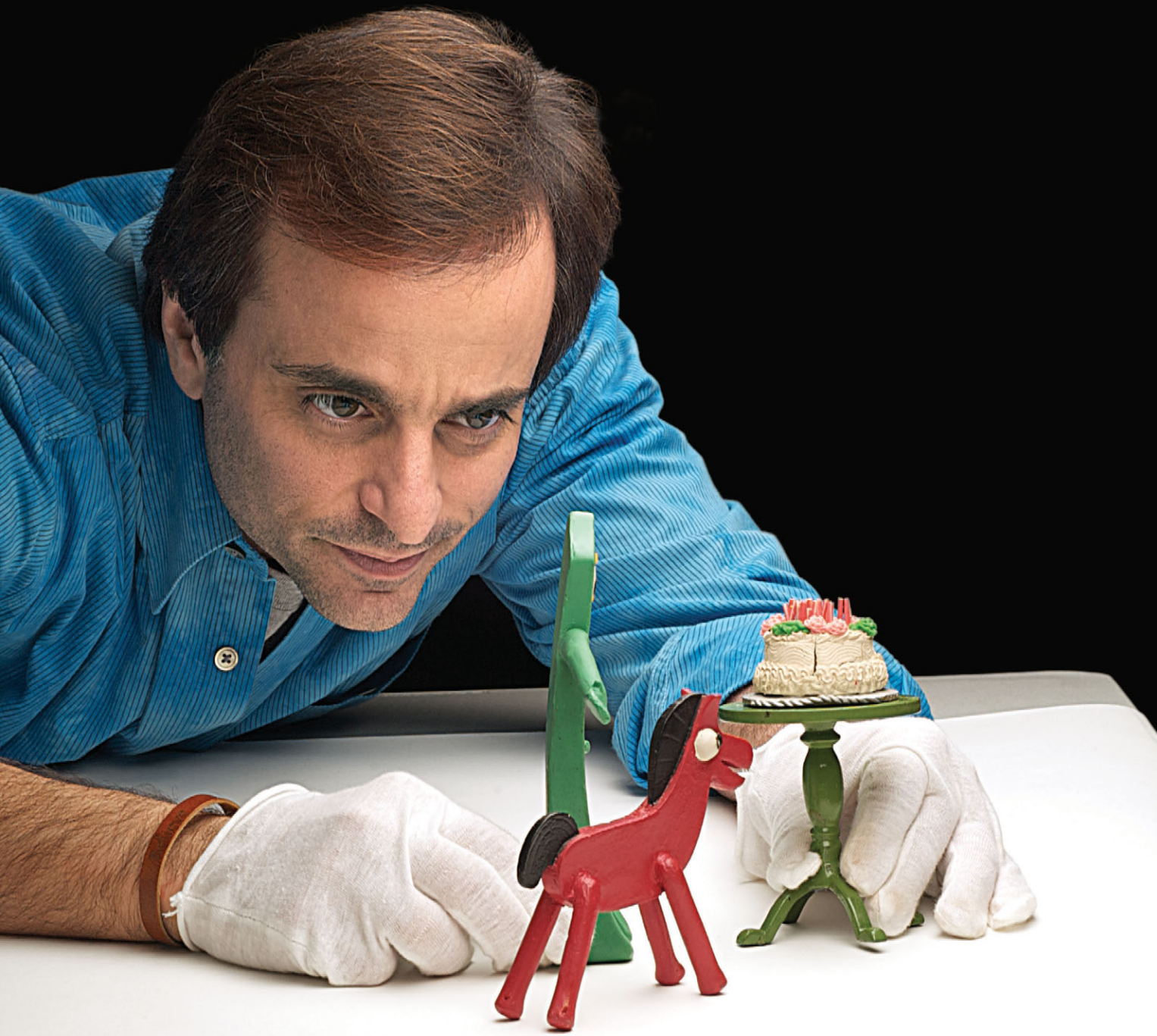
James Comisar in his photo studio with Gumby and Pokey



FORMER WRITER FOR MANY TV legends like Norman Lear and Fred Silverman, Comisar officially entered

the world of TV ephemera in 1989. That's when the aspiring writer and Johnny Carson fanatic paid \$212 for two bumper cards from *The Tonight Show*, hand-painted by Don Locke, the show's longtime illustrator and graphic artist. (Back then, shows used bumper cards to segue into and out of commercial breaks; they typically said something like, “Stay Tuned — More to Come.” Talk about a portent.)

PREVIOUS SPREAD: THE COMISAR COLLECTION INC.; ABOVE: FERGIUS GREER

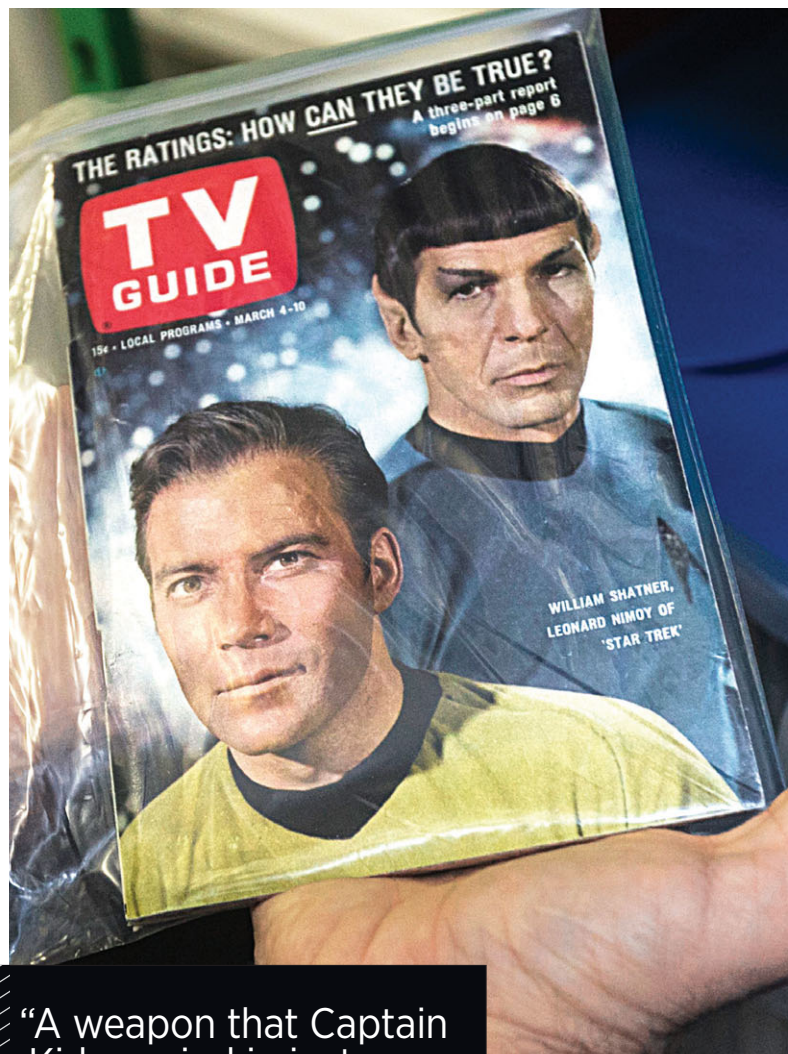


But the journey really began in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when an impressionable young Comisar regularly plunked his tush down in front of a TV in his parents' West Los Angeles home, enraptured by everything from *Batman* to *H.R. Pufnstuf*. At the time, TV already had a bad name. Newton N. Minow, a former chairman of the Federal Communications Commission, called TV "a vast wasteland ... a procession of game shows, formula comedies about totally unbelievable families, blood and thunder, mayhem, violence, sadism, murder ... and most of all, boredom." And that was in 1961.

As an overweight, often-bullied kid who wore what were known back then as "husky-size" jeans, Comisar found comfort and solace in front of the family's black-and-white TV, with its quaint antenna "ears" wrapped in aluminum foil for better reception. "No way I was going out for Little League," Comisar says. "So I was very happy to sit on our cold linoleum floor and hang out with Captain Kirk and Batman, with my grape soda and a bag of Funyuns. My young little mind became very aware of what characters wore and said. I loved comedies — and being funny helped me survive in school, because I could make bullies laugh."

Johnny Carson looms large over Comisar's quest. As a youth, he lived for the nights his mother would let him stay up to watch the legendary entertainer's opening monologue. Thus inspired, Comisar says that at age 15, he knew he would become a comedy writer. He did





“A weapon that Captain Kirk carried in just one episode of *Star Trek* sold for **\$225,000**. Even non-A-list pieces now sell for hundreds of thousands of dollars.”

**ABOVE:** James Comisar holds an original *TV Guide* issue featuring William Shatner and Leonard Nimoy of *Star Trek*.

life took a deliciously cosmic and Carsonic twist. Upon hearing that Carson planned to retire in 1992, Comisar started a 1990s version of a social-media campaign in an effort to snag a *Tonight Show* memento. For months, he peppered Carson's office with letters, faxes and phone calls, to no avail. Then, months after Carson retired, Comisar received a call from Helen Sanders, Carson's longtime assistant. She had momentous news: Impressed by Comisar's passion and zeal, Carson decided to give him the feathered and bejeweled turban worn by Carnac the Magnificent, Carson's popular, long-running character. “Short of my daughter's birth, it was the greatest moment of my life,” Comisar says of the day he was driven to Carson's home and

so right out of high school, first as a freelancer, writing jokes for Joan Rivers, then developing questions for bachelorettes on *The All-New Dating Game*.

In 1991, just a few years removed from the bumper-cards purchase, Comisar's

the legendary king of late-night television handed him the turban, then chatted for 45 minutes. “That was the turning point, where I knew this was going to be my life's work. If the King of Television was willing to turn over the crown to me and trusted that I had the heart and the skills to conserve his most iconic artifact, I knew what I was here to do.”

**A** TV-MEMORABILIA HOUND, Comisar couldn't have asked for a better setup. Being a writer gave him access to Universal Studios' giant rental departments, where nondescript set pieces that could be used elsewhere were available for a weekly pittance. This was akin to taking *Breaking Bad*'s Jesse Pinkman to a meth house and then tossing him a wad of Benjamins for good measure.

“If, say, the genie bottle from *I Dream of Jeannie* survived the 1960s production, it would literally end up on a shelf with other bric-a-brac and stuff,” Comisar recalls. “I'd walk up and down those aisles and recognize all these objects. They resonated deep inside my ‘husky’ brain.”

Better yet, Comisar quickly learned that if a rental piece wasn't returned (nudge, nudge, wink, wink), all he'd have to do is write a check for 10 times the weekly rental rate. He also discovered that the studios stored more distinctive-looking and, as such, less-rentable items on old soundstages with leaky roofs and rats lurking about. Here he found items like a Cylon robot from *Battlestar Galactica* and Lily Munster's dress. “Those pieces were held in low regard — more of a storage problem than a studio asset,” he says. “Early on, I obtained a lot of things by merely pulling up with a truck. The studios considered them clutter and garbage, but they were old friends to me.”

Jonesing for more, Comisar also used to run classified ads in the *Los Angeles Times* and spent countless hours driving around L.A., chasing down the resulting leads (life was harder before you could go virtual-dumpster diving via the Internet or Craigslist). His searches eventually went international in scope to recover items that moved overseas with shows' cast and crew members. The farthest journey? To South Kensington, England, where he scored Sacha Baron Cohen's trademark tracksuit, eyewear and cap from *Da Ali G Show*.

Living the collection dream requires

endless time and energy. As Comisar puts it, “If you like to sleep in or take weekends off, you need to find something else to preserve.”



COMISAR'S COLLECTION GREW AND GREW. AT FIRST, IT filled a small apartment closet. Then a garage. Then a storage unit. Then 10 storage units. And like *Breaking Bad*'s Walter White, he'd created a monster of sorts — without the cash-flow benefits enjoyed by White's alias, Heisenberg. In addition, restoring relics isn't cheap; when possible, Comisar hires the original costume designers (who happen to be some of Hollywood's leading costume experts) to mend their own work; other times he hires museum conservators to repair and maintain things such as a Superman tunic or Bozo the Clown's costume. “We ate plenty of mac-and-cheese dinners and missed family vacations along the way,” Comisar says. “But it was a sacrifice we were willing to make to save a kind of history that no one else was attending to.”

“My wife, Amber, was very patient when I commandeered our only hall closet and filled it with early acquisitions, such as genie bottles or Steve McGarrett's badge [from *Hawaii Five-O*],” he continues. “And when the time came to convert the garage into a storage area for the full-sized spaceship from *My Favorite Martian*, she was on board — even if it meant we had to park the cars blocks away.”

So where does America's crusader for TV's heritage go from here? At this point, there's certainly no turning back. If there's a 12-step program for addicted collectors, Comisar — who earns a living authenticating Hollywood artifacts — is beyond reproach. Which leaves him with a new goal — a final frontier for his memorabilia enterprise: a 30,000-square-foot museum where Americans can see what Comisar hath wrought.

“I didn't spend my adult life collecting these things so they could sit in humidity- and light-controlled warehouses,” he says. “I want them on view so people can enjoy a reunion of sorts with our shared American experience. A place where people can journey through seven decades of our popular culture. And it's absolutely unacceptable that there's no such museum dedicated to preserving TV's tangible history.”

But just like trying to unravel the Gordian knot that was *Lost* or figuring out the puzzling, fade-to-black final scene of *The Sopranos*, this endeavor is no slam dunk. On one hand, he believes that if he builds his Museum of Television, they will come. On the other hand, he can't help but recall noted actress Debbie Reynolds, who in 2010 gave up her decades-old dream of establishing a motion-picture-and-television museum to showcase her astonishing collection of costumes and memorabilia. Instead, the heartbroken actress auctioned it all off.

The thought of his collection suffering a similar fate pains Comisar to no end. “The collection's emotional value is way greater to me than the monetary value,” he says. “Parting with any piece truly sucks.” He knows the feeling well, as he's sold pieces periodically to make ends meet or to generate cash to buy more. The most painful sale? Every one, he states without hesitation. “These are my kids,” he asserts. “How do you possibly decide to get rid of one over the other?”

Nonetheless, to drum up seed money for the museum, Comisar is selling one of his prize pieces: the Cowardly Lion costume from *The*

*Wizard of Oz*. Now wait a minute, you may think; *The Wizard of Oz* was a movie, not a television show, yes? Yup, released in 1939. But people of a certain age — like the 48-year-old Comisar — will recall that from 1959 to 1991, it was annually broadcast on TV and became a cherished viewing tradition for millions of families. Comisar won't reveal the costume's asking price. But given that Reynolds auctioned off Marilyn Monroe's iconic “subway grate” dress from *The Seven Year Itch* for a whopping \$4.6 million (she reportedly bought it for just \$200), it's easy to imagine it'll take some serious coin — financial courage, so to speak — to take the Cowardly Lion costume off Comisar's hands.



HERE'S NO DOUBT THAT many people feel TV is about as valuable as a bitcoin. Just look at the derisive terms used over the years: Idiot box. Boob tube. Opiate of the masses.

But for every critic, millions of people like Comisar fondly relate to television shows the same way they associate favorite songs with certain life passages. For many folks, *Friends* was, well, a true friend — an emotional touchstone that held a mirror up to their own lives. Even silly TV theme songs stick in our collective cranium like gum on Theodore “Beaver” Cleaver's PF Flyers.

“The fact is that so much of our personal history — the sights and sounds of our childhoods — is bundled up with these shows and their theme songs and characters,” Comisar says with evangelical zeal. “I can't tell you how many times I'm in airports and people ask what I do. And when I tell them, virtually every time it gets into a sort of storytelling, where people tell me their favorite show, or explain why they preferred *The Munsters* over *I Dream of Jeannie*. In a way, Captain Kirk and Herman Munster and Keith Partridge were members of our families.”

No doubt that's how it felt to that husky kid who found comfort by hanging out with the characters he befriended on a small, seven-channel television some 40 years ago.

“All I wanted to do was honor television history and own a tangible piece of my childhood,” he says.

One item at a time. Or two. Or three. 

**KEN WYSOCKY** is a freelance writer and editor in Milwaukee who's still stuck in the first stage of grieving over *Breaking Bad*'s demise. He believes owning Walter White's porkpie hat would help him move on.

The most painful sale? Every one, he states without hesitation. “These are my kids,” he asserts.



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